

DEATH SPIRAL

BOOK I

James Boedeker



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by

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When SEAL sniper Robert O'Leary was kicked out of the Navy, he was told he would be fine, that he was a survivor. Not likely. A squid through and through, with serious trust issues, O'Leary's been trained to kill and is very good at it. But he's haunted – not by the shots he made, but by the ones he was ordered not to take. The ghosts of the past won't stand down and let him to adjust to civilian life, and the beast within demands blood and will not be ignored.

While on vacation in Thailand, O'Leary decides to stay in the country that is home away from home for many expatriate veterans. When he falls for a disfigured woman and learns how she was mutilated and tortured, he sees a chance to redeem himself by exacting revenge on her behalf. Suddenly he's on a mission to make things right and ensure no more girls are victimized.

Together with a group of other American expats, he declares war on East European pimps and drug dealers that terrorize local bar girls. The plan is to hit the Romanians hard and let the Germans take the blame. After the Germans and Romanians start fighting, the Russians will get sucked into the fray. Then they all will die. The trick is not to join them in the dying part. But if there's one thing O'Leary knows, it's that any plan can go south in a heartbeat.

This against-all-odds paramilitary action thriller is a triumph for truth, justice, and automatic weapons. It tells of one man's fall from grace, and the journey he makes to reclaim his sanity, his soul, his life.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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fresh air – direct and honest to a fault.

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Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our military serves a sometimes less than grateful nation. They are used by our politicians as a common man would use a tool. We can only hope that they are not wasted. Our men and women serve without question and without thought to personal gain. Our troops serve with honor, often in spite of their civilian masters. They can be used hard and, when burned-out, are often discarded like a cheap watch. Once out of the service, they are subjected to the attitude of 'not our problem anymore' held by far too many politicians, and often they end up being abandoned. God bless the men and women who wear the uniform and who serve their country. I think I speak for most Americans when I say you make us proud.

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ONE

I freely admit I am an addict. What is my drug of choice? Duty? Service? Combat? Am I an adrenaline junkie? I don't know. Maybe all. I am messed up, going downhill fast. The Navy told me not to worry. I am a survivor. I will be fine. *Ha!*

How do you go from being a US Navy SEAL to working in a toilet paper factory, sweeping floors? How do you go from being a sniper to just another cog on an assembly line? Figure that out and let me know, because I don't have a clue.

I arrived in Thailand months ago for a short sojourn, but never left. At first, the rush of something new, and strange pussy every night, filled the void. Now, pussy is a hand-job by any other name.

I gaze at the bar girl I brought home. Her name is Nom. She looks about sixteen, but I don't know. Thai girls all look young for their age. Nom whimpers in her sleep. Is she dreaming about the sex we had? God, I hope not. She had that same look in her eyes I know I do – the look of broken promises and no hope for a better tomorrow. I wonder, not for the first time, how I got to this point. How did I end up in Bangkok, living in a cheap rundown hotel?

I light another cigarette and pour another shot. I am lost, with no way back. I am an addict and know it. My dealer cut me off. *Ungrateful bastard.* I'm drinking straight from the bottle now. It ain't the shots I made that cause guilt. It's the ones I didn't take that make me rage and

drown the flames in booze.

I hate those suited cowards grinning for the cameras, pressing the flesh like they have something to be proud of. They sing to the press and talk about the all important decisions they make. Heroes one and all. Just ask them. They will look you in the eye and tell you how they saved democracy and the free world.

I look at Nom, and she is watching me. I know she is afraid, and what she is thinking. *This farang drinks too much and talks to himself.* I don't blame her. I look at my face in the mirror, and I see a lunatic. It scares me.

I bring the bottle to bed. Why not? She's earned a belt or two. She takes a drink and asks if I feel horny, if she makes me feel good. *No, baby, I don't feel horny.* I pass out.

Nom is gone before I wake. I gave her cab money before we started the night's adventures. I doubt she had any desire to talk before leaving.

I lie in bed, and echoes of my past wash over me. I flash back to 1999...

* * * * *

My head is pounding. I am fevered, wet and freezing in my ghillie suit, waiting for permission to shoot. Osama bin Laden sits in that shack, all nice and warm. I could kill him right now. He sits, eating with his fucking fingers. We finally have the bastard, but the dickheads in DC can't make up their minds about what to do. I have been in this shit for three days, waiting for this inbred fuck to show. *There he is! What's to decide?*

I'm cold and wet. I haven't eaten a real meal in a week. This is a shot I need to make. My gut tells me this one will matter. Then comes the word. My spotter authenticates and acknowledges. *Frosty roger out.* He taps

my leg twice, and I know the answer. *Abort*. I stifle the outburst surging from the pit of my stomach. I consider taking the shot anyway. I know this guy will hurt us. But I am not paid to make that decision. I follow orders. We back off into the night. We have a long walk ahead of us. We don't have the luxury of venting our frustrations or disappointment. We are deep in-country, with no friendlies for support.

This was the beginning of the end for me. I recognize that now. This was the first day of my death spiral.

Two years later, that scumbag would end up killing thousands of US citizens in the now infamous terrorist attack, 9-11. Sammy 'The Burglar' Berger would be caught stealing classified documents, and the former Commander in Chief would be denying that we ever had a shot. He was such a good liar that I almost believed him myself, and I was the one there with my finger on the fucking trigger.

After leaving the Navy, I tried a normal job, and it bored me. When I applied for the job, I was told the Fortune 500 company preferred to hire vets. They felt we were more reliable, more consistent, and better disciplined. At the time, I remembered thinking, *Well that's great. At least they appreciate who we are.*

Week one, during indoctrination, they lectured about how they were a 'principle-based' business. They didn't do things like the military. They treated their employees like adults. This ... coming from a gal one year out of college, as if she had a clue about the military.

She went on to explain that the military tells soldiers how to dress, when to sleep, when to wake up, and when to eat. But an hour before that, we had a lecture about expectations. We were required to wear certain clothes and shoes, and no hair below the shoulders. We were told our floor supervisor would tell us when to go to break and

lunch. I was wondering what the hell was so different from the military. I found out soon enough. Unlike the military, free thinking in civilian life was frowned upon. You were branded as negative if you didn't agree with idiots calling the shots that never did the job. Don't say the F-word because someone might be offended. They expected you to carry dead weight slackers, and make them feel like they contributed. You had to ask for permission to go take a piss. Yeah, like adults in a first grade class, trapped in a Dr. Seuss book. If I wasn't the one stuck in the nightmare, I would have found it hilarious. "Don't call me boss," I was told by my floor supervisor. "We are all business owners." *Boss, you control when I can go piss.*

I'll never forget the meeting where that same young manager told us about an exciting new approach to safety. Every day, we were going to 'celebrate' safety. I caught myself thinking, *Now what?* Then she asked who wanted to lead the safety cheer, and she looked at me like I was going to do a back flip and a split and shout, *Go team!*

Then orientation was over, and there I was, having to put up with some college grad who actually said, "I get you, man," because he aced a fucking video game. Yeah, he actually believed he knew what it was like to be in war because he kicked ass at *Medal of Honor*. Every day he'd ask me questions about shooting bad guys. I'll never forget him reliving being shot at in the game, and how he faced down Nazis, taking them out one at a time. And then he had the gall to say, "I should have been a SEAL, because I never miss."

I wanted to punch him in the face and introduce him to a real ass-whuppin' so he might catch a clue. All the while, I was thinking, *If this guy is our future, we are fucked.* So I told him, "Let me show you what I would do if you were shooting at me." I gave him a heat gun we used

for checking temperatures on the machines. "Pretend this is a gun," I said. "Show me what you would do if I were a bad guy." The idiot actually played along. By this time, other employees were watching, all grins.

The college punk aimed the gun, shouting, "Die asshole!" I stepped inside his stance, knocking the gun hand aside with a left-hand knife-hand strike, followed by driving my right fist into his sternum. I slapped him across his face with my right hand, following through to grab the gun. I wrenched it from him and buried it in his face.

Congratulations hero, you faced down a bad guy. You will get a medal posthumously. A little different than the video games, ain't it? Surprise ... I was immediately fired.

There's just no real structure in civilian life. They pretend to provide structure, but it's really just a straightjacket. I eventually found myself sucking on the nipple of my 45. No wonder I ran away to Thailand. I needed to escape the insanity.

Of course, I could be like most everyone else, and just blame it all on my upbringing. I grew up poor in a small house with a large family. My father was a raging alcoholic, and my mother was a textbook whack job. A kind thought never occurred to that woman. The truth was a stranger to her tongue. We never went without enough to eat, but we never had extra.

When most kids were learning how to ride a bike, I was learning the art of poaching deer for food. I learned to field dress a deer at night without the benefit of a flashlight. Making a shot at three hundred yards seemed normal to me, because I learned fast that a second shot meant a good kick in the ass for wasting ammo. By the age of twelve, I had poached more deer than most people kill legally in a life time. Later, Uncle Sam honed my skills to perfection.

For a family so poor, it was amazing my father always had enough money to stay plastered. My mother never saw a stray dog or cat she wouldn't take in. Why do people like that even have kids? I didn't get to go to the mall like most kids. I was twelve before I saw the inside of a mall. I was less in wonder of all the stores than I was in wonder of the hot girls walking by. That wonder is still with me to this day when I watch the Thai women go about their business. I don't like watching girls pose or flirt. I like watching them in their natural element. I like watching people be for real, in a world where everyone is a clone.

When I was twelve, I worked on my uncle's dairy, earning my own money. Of course, I had to give my parents their cut of my action. I saved what I could and bought the first new clothes I ever owned, a pair of Levi jeans and some shirts and a pair of sneakers.

When you grow up poor, wearing hand-me-downs, you learn about bullies early on. They never let you forget your place in life. Wearing new threads, I thought for sure my life would turn for the better. The only problem was that bullies are a special breed of prick. They will never let you up once they have you down.

Working on a farm makes you strong. You learn about life from beginning to end. Work builds your body and mind. Throwing eighty-pound bales of hay every day builds your muscles granite-hard. The day comes when you stop being a victim. I never went looking for a fight, but I damn sure finished any fight that found me. One good thing about my dear old dad, he never had a problem teaching us the ways of violence and how to inflict hurt on another man.

* * * * *

It is early afternoon by the time I shag ass out of bed and hit the streets. The air is filled with the stench of sewers and exhaust, mixed with a hint of Thai curry. I see the same vendors every day, selling their grilled chicken, *som tom*, or any number of other foods. They all have a niche, and it's cheap.

I learned the hard way to go slow at first with the native foods. You don't need to be a ladyboy to wake up with a sore asshole in this town. Just eat fresh spicy papaya salad, and you will know the wrath of Thailand firsthand. Those days are behind me, and I can eat about anything they offer without getting a blown-out asshole. Today, I just want a cup of coffee and bowl of rice soup. I go to the same place every day, and they tolerate me. Nice old folks, just trying to make do. I may be fucked-up and on my way out, but I mind my manners when it comes to elders. My parents raised me right on that point.

I take my usual seat. The old man greets me, same as always. "*Khun Lobelt, sa bai dee mai krub?*" He says my name as 'Lobelt' instead of Robert. A typical Asian problem with pronouncing the letter 'r.' I'm used to it now.

"*Sa bai dee krub, khun Non.*" I don't speak much Thai, but I know how to answer a polite greeting. His wife doesn't like me much. She glares my way. I understand. I don't like me either.

The old man doesn't need to ask what I want, because I've ordered the same thing every day for eight weeks. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Old Non brings my coffee and soup, along with an English newspaper. I pay up, plus a one-hundred-baht tip. That's a one-hundred-percent tip, but I like the old man and love his soup. The coffee is a fraud, but so is all coffee in Thailand. One day I'll shock the old man and order a cold drink, change the whole damn game. I smile about

that as I read the paper.

I see that the current Commander and Chief won his bid for a second term. I'm not one bit surprised. Anyone was better than that undertaker-looking son-of-bitch the Democrats ran. Another self-made war hero turned tree-hugger married-for-money kind of guy. As bad as my life is, at least I ain't him.

I hear a commotion and look up from my paper. Some young punk is grieving Non, probably rousting him for money. Non sees me and gives a quick shake of his head. *No*. He doesn't want me involved. That's too bad. I would have kicked that punk's ass up between his shoulders. But chances are, he is involved with the local mafia, and my involvement would hurt Non. A few minutes later, the little dickhead is leaving with a wad of baht in his hand. I take note of what he looks like. Maybe I'll catch him out one night and settle up for old Non. Now, that is a pleasant thought.

Horns honking, brakes squealing, and it's about a hundred in the shade. This is Bangkok, and I feel at home here already. Kicking back, drinking my make-believe coffee, I feel almost at peace. I love the frantic pace, kind of like watching ants on the move. It seems so random, but it all has purpose. *What's my purpose?* I wonder. Right now it's to drink my coffee and read the paper.



T W O

I like to idle my time away at the mall. In Thailand, they have a wonderful sense of organization when it comes to parking at the mall. The taxi pulls up, and my fare is ninety baht. That's three dollars. I walk past the fountain and toss a coin for luck.

In Bangkok, the show never ends – the scenes just change. I have a preference for Fashion Island. I see this girl every day, working at the Dairy Queen. She is tall, as Thais go, maybe five-seven and about one-hundred-twenty pounds. Unlike most Thais, she never smiles. She isn't beautiful. The left side of her face looks like someone used a cheese grater and a pick ax on her. She tries to hide the scars by brushing her hair to the side.

I go up and order a pretend milkshake. Real milkshakes are another thing you just can't find in Thailand. More like ice milk, but hey, it's cold and wet. She averts her eyes downward when I smile at her.

I take my milkshake, sit, and watch the masses. I fantasize about saying hello to her and talking about our lives. In reality, I only worked up the courage to watch her from a distance. This girl has a wounded soul. I know the look. It's the same look I see in the mirror every day. I want to tell her that we are the same, but I know she will think, *Farang – bah!* Yeah, crazy foreigner – that's me.

There isn't much for me to do during the day; the places I hang out don't start hopping till around nine at night. For now, I slurp my milkshake and watch fine ass

walk by. Hey, it's free entertainment. I'm easily entertained. But then my mind starts to wander...

Looking through a scope at a target nine-hundred meters away, watching a target being his normal self, either makes you second-guess your mission, or it reaffirms your mission. I watched one bad guy for over an hour before I put a shot on him. I saw him interact with his family – a loving father, a great husband – right up until the wife and kids left in the car, and ten minutes later another car pulled up. Three young girls got out and were ordered to strip. Right out in the open in front of the hired help. He walked up to one after another, sticking his finger in their asses. Three slow breaths and ... tick tock ... I stopped his clock. He didn't even know he was being watched.

I had a friend tell me about a shot he made on a woman. She was a specialist in torture, and her victims were reported as MIA of course, because who could explain what she left of them? He shot her at seven-hundred meters after watching her tend her garden for fifteen minutes. She had the face of an angel – but watch one of her videos, and you'd see the other side. We all have another side we try to hide. For some, it's darker than others...

I watch the girl at Dairy Queen. She is cleaning a spotless surface to keep busy. A customer makes an order, staring at the scars. I see the girl's shoulders sag ever so slightly. It's like every time someone stares, she is slapped. Something about her captivates my interest. Maybe it's the way she moves when she thinks no one is around. A wounded dove with a heart bigger than most people have ever known.

Life isn't fair. No kidding. I learned that lesson early. I also learned I can cheat fate once in a while, level the playing field, if you will. Watching the girl reminds me of the humanity I lost long ago. I miss being normal.

A young stud walks towards her. *Wait for it...* I can tell this will be interesting. She doesn't look happy. The body language between these two screams of fear versus intimidation. My stomach tightens. I hate bullies. He is whispering. I can tell she doesn't like it. "*Mai mee ngeun!*" – *no money* – she pleads.

I see the girl take money from the till, handing it to the thug. He rewards her with a cuff to the back of her head. I stand to take a position on this asshole. I can't do it here, but his arrogance will be his downfall shortly. This slick bastard will have his own car, and I intend to open his door for him.

I follow Slick through the mall, watching him roust more victims. Slick wears Levi jeans four sizes too big, a hoodie, and a ball cap turned sideways. His Ray-Ban sunglasses ride halfway down his nose like a big-time rapper. His beat-down is long overdue.

I follow Slick out to the parking lot. He walks to a Mitsubishi sports car. I scan for parking attendants. *None in sight.* I close the gap. The car alarm tweets, doors unlock. He's about to open the door when I hit him with a kidney punch and bounce his face off the window. Kidney punches hurt twice as bad as the average kick in the balls. I grab Slick by the hair and put his face through the window. I heave him back, open the door, and shove him inside. He is out cold. I check his pockets, taking all his money. His face is shredded by glass. He will wear those scars for life. I slam the door shut and kick a respectable dent in the door. *Welcome to the big leagues, bitch. Ain't quite the same as strong-arming girls, is it?*

I head back to the mall via a different entrance. No witnesses, no troubles. The asshole never saw who hit him. I head to the Dairy Queen, wanting another shake. I order my usual. The girl is still visibly shaken. I know she is

worried about how to explain money missing from the till. I know she is wondering how much more pain and humiliation she must suffer to satisfy the gods that fuck with her life.

I pay for the shake and drop a large tip into the tip jar. She is visibly stunned. I mumble, "*Mai pen rai krub,*" and walk away.

She calls to me, bows, and says, "*Kob khun ka.*" *Thank you.*

I return the bow and repeat, "*Mai pen rai.*" *You're welcome.* Her smile makes it all worth it. I'm glad to do something nice for a change. The tip was ten thousand baht. Slick likes to carry a wad of cash. He should know better. The fool might like to see a doctor when he wakes up, though.

As I continue on my daily routine, such as it is, I think about the girl at Dairy Queen. I was once her ... weak, like the ones assholes prefer to fuck with. That was a long time ago, though – a different life. I was born with a cleft palate, everyone's favorite target for my first twelve years. I learned a lot from the experience. First, how to run and run fast. Second, that I didn't like playing the victim.

Bullies often travel in packs. Like wolves, most are half-assed jocks with little dicks. You don't see a lot of jocks make the SEAL teams for good reason. They are too hung-up on their own sense of self-importance. They can't think past the day they caught the game winning pass. That shit just doesn't work on the teams.

I am an average looking guy, average build, and I blend in with the crowd. With me, it always was and always will be the men on my team. My needs are always second to theirs, and fuck the game-winning pass. It takes a team to do it.

I also have another gift that, perhaps, I am too gifted

in. I can kill another human being and feel absolutely no remorse, especially if I figure he has it coming. I can look a bad guy in the eye and stop his clock without hesitation.

I used to be a flag-waving patriot. My attitude was always, *Take my country, wrong or right, because the end justified the means*. One day I woke up and realized that our bad guys were as bad as the bad guys we were fighting. It wasn't a fluke that we were sent to play bodyguard to the perverts and scum of the world. We kill a bad guy because another bad guy doesn't like him, or because he won't be *our* bad guy.

Don't get me wrong. Killing bad guys is what really turns my screws. But letting bad guys live because the bottom-feeders in DC want to use them ... that I can't abide.

My fall from grace started when I ended a mission by putting a .45 ACP through the right eye of a particularly foul bad guy who also happened to be *our* bad guy. The year was 2000, and POTUS must have been looking to make a statement to help his VP. We were on a so-called 'fact-finding' mission, and our job was to protect a piece-of-shit poppy exporter who was supposed to lead us to bin Laden. What he led us to was a village where he had to inspect the harvest. He was a big shot in the region, and the locals bent low to kiss his ass. Fathers were pimping out their ten-year-old boys to this devout Muslim – so he wouldn't be tempted by any virgin girls, I guess. He made a big show of bragging about how the USA sent their best to do his bidding.

Normally, I wouldn't take it personally. All these pretenders like to put on a show for the locals. But this pig took it to a whole new level. He had us observe his play time after cornholing a boy. Thirty seconds into his jerkfest, my 45 stopped his clock. Any idiot on the planet

should know this asshole didn't have any clue where we might find bin Laden. I would have been court-martialed on the spot, but the Cock-In-Ass types were forewarned that we would spill the beans that Slick Willie had us guarding pedophiles.

I remember the look on that goat-fucker's face when I drew my side arm. He just couldn't believe I would do it. The locals had a cleanup detail on their hands, and we beat feet out of there. My only regret is that I didn't kill him before the fuckfest started. As a military man, it's hard going against orders.

* * * * *

I go back to the Dairy Queen. I want to talk to the girl. I don't know why, but she has me a bit twisted. She isn't busy, and I see the tip jar is empty again. Thais can be very protective of their money, especially when it's ten thousand baht. She looks at me and smiles. *Ah, she sees me in a different light.* If she knew what I really was, she would run screaming. Most people can't relate to an engine of death.

I smile; she bows. The Thai are a very polite people. I return the bow and introduce myself. "*Sa wad dee krub. Phom cheu Robert krub.*" *Hello, I am Robert.*

She replies in kind. "*Sa wad dee ka chan cheu Mina ka.*"

I am smiling my best *I am harmless* smile, and she is giving me her best *I wonder what he wants* smile.

"Mina, I want to take you to dinner to tonight," I say.

Her smile falters. I know what she is thinking – she accepted my large tip, and now I expect something in return.

"I just want company during my meal," I explain

quickly, “and hope to get to know you better. I have been coming here every day, trying to work up enough courage to ask you.” I resort to telling the truth, figuring that is the best approach.

“Yes, *khun* Robert, you always ask for same milkshake. I see you watch me sometimes. But boss, he no let date customer. He have rule.”

“Mina, please let me take you to dinner,” I say, determined not to take no for answer. “I want to know you. We are the same. Look in my eyes, we are the same. We feel the same pain. Mina, please just give me one chance. If you’re worried it’s about the money, it’s not. That was your money to begin with. I just got it back for you. He won’t hurt you again, and he won’t bother you again – not as long as I am alive. I promise.”

Mina is stunned and looks to see if we have unwanted attention. “*Khun* Robert, why you do that for me? You don’t know me, you don’t know anything about me. I am ugly girl, but I need to work to help my family. I am not bar girl or bad girl. I just work.”

“Mina, you are not ugly girl,” I say, looking her straight in the eyes and meaning it. “If you want, I will show you my scars. Mine are worse. Please let me be your friend, let me help you. I need to do this for you and for me – or I will be lost. I will never hurt you, I promise you.”

Out of a sense of obligation, or maybe my sincerity and good looks – yeah, that’s got to be it – Mina finally agrees to dinner. She seems relieved when the conversation ends. I just hope she won’t have a change of heart.

* * * * *

As I approach the Dairy Queen, I feel like a kid on his first date. I know I need this date if I am going to save

myself – I just don't understand why.

I watch Mina talking to her relief, a girl about fifteen. The teen wears too much makeup and is disrespectful. The teen turns on the charm for the *farang*, but I ignore her and give Mina my best smile, saying, "Mina, I am so happy to see you."

Mina gives me a shy wave, relishing the attention. She gathers her things. "I need change clothes," she says. "Is okay with you we stop comfort room?"

"Of course, Mina. I want you to be comfortable."

I wait outside as Mina changes her clothes. I watch people go by, *farang* with young girls, ladyboys strutting with other ladyboys, schoolgirls in their uniforms. They all talk on their cell phones. You never see Thais without their cell phones.

Mina comes out wearing jeans and a pink tee-shirt. Her hair still covers the damaged side of her face, but at least she is making eye contact. I see the hint of a smile.

Pizza Hut is crowded. Thais love Pizza Hut and ketchup on their pizza. Go figure. The hostess seats us quickly. The Thai are an efficient people, and very polite.

The day's special includes two large pizzas. I ask for a large seafood pizza with the second to go, using the special as an excuse to get a second pizza for Mina to take home without embarrassing her.

As we wait for our order, I ask her, "How was your day?"

She smiles, seeming relieved I've broken the conversational ice. "Day okay. Not very busy, not many rude people."

Soon she is chatting with me like we're long-lost friends. When our pizza arrives, Mina is shy to start, so I serve her a big slice. She dips her slice in ketchup. *Odd*. We only eat half, so I box the leftovers to go, along with the

second pizza that comes with the special.

In Thailand, it's common for people to sit and chat long after the meal is finished, and we are no exception. I don't ask about her face, because it is too personal. I tell her about my life, that I was a sailor. I don't tell her what I did in the Navy, and carefully avoid details that might scare her off. Well after nine, I can tell Mina is ready to go, but she is too polite to say. I'm pleased that this really has been an excellent first date and offer, "Will you allow me take you home, to make sure you're safe?" *Smooth*.

She blushes, then nods her head yes. "You can meet my parents, if you like."

"Yes," I agree before thinking. "I would like that very much." *Not so smooth*. I'm suddenly worried, because her parents will see me for the animal that I am – a whore-mongering, unemployed drunk. Who would trust their child with someone like me? My headache comes back. *Don't blow this*, I tell myself. *You need to keep it together for a little longer*.

Mina is concerned. "You okay? You look sad." She sees we are the same, both with deep wounds.

"I am very happy," I assure her. "I didn't want this night to end. I enjoyed our time together. Please tell me that you had fun too, that we can do this again."

"Yes, *khun* Robert, I have fun. I wish we can do again." She lowers her gaze, then says, "*Khun* Robert ... can I ask?"

"You can ask anything, Mina. Don't be afraid. I want you to be comfortable with me."

She doesn't look at me as she says quickly, "*Khun* Robert, why you take me dinner? Why you like me? I know I am nothing, ugly girl."

I take hold of her hand. "Mina, I see your heart, your pain, because we are the same. That is why I share dinner with you. We will be good friends, and you will always have

me. If you are sad or lonely or scared, you can call me.”

Mina’s eyes brim with tears. “*Khun* Robert, how do I say thank you? You so kind to ugly girl.”

“Mina, you can say thank you by not saying that you are an ugly girl anymore. Thank me by learning to like yourself the way I like who you are.”

Mina smiles. “I will try.”

“Let’s get you home so your family doesn’t worry.”

* * * * *

The taxi ride is short. She only lives a few miles away. Her parents’ house is a small home, but in good condition. A nice flower garden decorates the front. Mom and Dad sit out front, waiting. *Great*. I know they waited up. It’s my experience that older Thais usually go to bed early, wake up early. I tell the taxi to wait, that I’ll be right back.

I walk Mina to their porch, grateful it’s dark. I don’t want them to get a good look. My heart is racing. I am genuinely afraid of her parents. I know they have seen it all. I don’t want this mission to fail. I know it’s my last chance to find my way back.

I bow. “*Sa wad dee krub.*” *Hello.*

They do a casual bow and smile. Never let the Thai smile fool you. It doesn’t always mean ‘I am happy to see you,’ or ‘I am happy about you.’ It’s a damned effective poker face.

Mina introduces me as *khun* Robert. They converse in Thai. Her parents smile and nod, never taking their eyes off me. Her father asks Mina questions. She is embarrassed. She turns and says to me, “My father ask me. He want to know what your work.”

“I am retired from the United States Navy,” I say, mostly for her father’s benefit.

Mina translates. Her father nods, still with the fake smile.

“My father want to know why you come Thailand, he want to know if you stay here now.”

“Tell your father that I come to Thailand because cost of living is less than USA, and I plan to stay.”

Her father says some choice words, nods curtly, and abruptly goes inside.

“My father say he happy for your gift of pizza,” Mina says.

I know that’s not what he said, but I nod, bowing to Mina’s mother. Mina walks me to the taxi. We don’t speak. I give her a chaste kiss on the forehead. “I’ll see you again tomorrow at Dairy Queen.”

“Yes, *khun* Robert, you come there every day.”

* * * * *

I lie in bed, sweating. This is my first sober day in two years. My headache is back, and my ears are ringing. It’s raining outside again, so the windows are closed. My fan has picked today to quit on me. Lightning flashes. It starts thundering. I hear screaming in the street. It sounds like a bar girl having a fight with her boyfriend. I struggle to hold old memories at bay, reaffirming my promise to myself – no booze until I complete my mission. But my head pounds as never before. I cringe, knowing I will lose this battle. The beast is coming – the rage, the sick feeling of vertigo, like I am being sucked through a hole in my life...

And then I’m back there. It’s hotter than the Kitchens of Hell. We’re both wearing our ghillie suits, and I have sand in every orifice of my body, including five pounds in the crack of my ass. Sand filters down to my ball sac, like a herd of mice gnawing on my nuts. I am set up in my hide,

M-24 chambered in 300 mag, waiting for an Iraqi officer to show his head. When he does – tick tock, I'll stop his clock.

Jasper taps my leg and whispers we have company. The spotter is the shooter's eyes and ears. He not only calculates distance and windage, he follows the shot, calling out corrections. And he keeps watch. He has my six. The shooter's job is to focus on the target and make the shot.

Iraqis are coming right towards us. Five assholes loaded for bear. Short of stepping on us, they won't spot us. I pivot right slowly, taking a bead on the lead asshole. No doubt about it, they see something. Most likely just coming to check. But what did they see? What did we miss? I look to my left, and there it is, an old bomb sticking out of the sand. The windstorm must have uncovered it, because I damn sure didn't see it. It's on a direct bearing to those ragheads, and we are right in the middle. No way out but to fight.

At four-hundred meters, they are easy shots. My magazine holds three, counting the one in the chamber. I whisper on my mark. Jasper carries an M-16, and he can hit at five-hundred meters. That's not my concern. What worries me is, once we start shooting, the rest of the bad guys will get a fix on us. What do we do? Oh well, no one lives forever. We might as well kill as many as we can.

I center-mass the lead Iraqi and chamber another round. Jasper shoots at the two on the right. They all hit the sand about the same time, food for the maggots. I see a head pop up and give him a third eye, blowing the back of his head off. My spotter shoots low. I'll bust his balls later.

Still no return fire, and nothing from the camp below us. How can they sleep through this? I see another head pop up over the body of my first target. I hit him in the face. Red mist fills the air. I reload, only one Iraqi left.

Jasper settles his hash as he gets up to run. I hear the thump-thump of mortars. We are about to have our own hash settled.

Mortars hit four-hundred meters short of our position. I say a prayer as we back out. The Iraqis haven't figured out where we are yet. They saturate the area, hoping to get us. They won't come out to play. Snipers fuck with their heads that way.

We can't call an air strike because the war hasn't started yet, and no helicopter is coming this far in-country. We are alone and expect no help. My ass would be puckered if not for the sand in the crack. It's broad daylight. They will see our tracks. I signal for my spotter to stop. We will wait this out. We have no choice.

Mortars rounds pound all around. My hearing is shot. As rounds hit closer, I know genuine fear. We are helpless. I scope the compound, hoping for a target, and I see the Iraqi officer. Three deep breaths. Exhale. *Tick tock, motherfucker*. Center mass, and he is down. His clock is stopped.

I see more Iraqis taking cover. We settle in for a long hot day, waiting for nightfall. They walk the mortars right over us. Planes roar low overhead, followed by the sudden whump of napalm. A giddy feeling of relief fills my heart almost enough to make me forget the herd of sand-mice gnawing at my nut sac. My spotter ain't moving. I whisper, "Yo, Jasper, it's the cavalry." He doesn't answer.

Two years, we were a team. His son is named after me. I promised his wife to keep him safe. My mind is numb with dread as I inch closer. His ghillie suit is leaking blood. A shrapnel and rocks tore off his face. You don't see that in the movies, soldiers being killed by rocks. It's something you pray you can forget, but of course you never will.

His radio isn't damaged, and I make the call. How will

I explain to his wife? Why couldn't it have been me instead? Jasper was a good kid, with a kind heart. Not like me. He deserved to raise his boy. What made me more deserving to live? I feel rage building. I grab my weapon and scope the compound. I see a few survivors moving. Tick tock, another kill. I slam another round in, tick tock, tick tock. I reload, tick tock, tick tock, tick tock, three more kills. My barrel is hot, needing to cool, but I reload. I am not finished. The rage is in control. I am down to my last three rounds, but have my side arm and Jasper's M-16. When that's done, I have my combat knife. I deal in death. That's my, job, my purpose. I see Iraqis attempting to escape the compound. Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock, I stop three more clocks. I grab the M-16. Those bastards wanted a war, well they got one. I'm seven-hundred meters out. The M-16 is less than effective, but I don't care. The rage has me, and it's taken over. All reason is gone. I want vengeance, and I shall have it.

* * * * *

I snap awake, bathed in sweat, shaking as if I were in freezing water. I roll from my bed, moaning. *Why do these ghosts haunt me?* I gunned down every man that I could that day, until I ran out of bullets. The Blackhawk arrived six hours later to airlift me and Jasper home. That day was the first time the rage took me. The ghosts come to remind me. Always they are just under the surface, waiting to be freed.

Jasper, I am so sorry, my brother. I did my best to keep my promise.

I'm not sure why I'm talking to Jasper. He can't hear me. Maybe I'm talking to myself. It's all in my head now. The past is gone, but it won't leave me alone. I know that I

am insane and can't last much longer.

Focus on the mission, I tell myself.

I need a drink and a whore – anything to distract me from these ghosts. I want to call Mina, but never thought to get her number. *Smooth.* It's 3:42 a.m. That would be 3:42 p.m. in Virginia. I want to call Jasper's widow instead, but I know that isn't right either. I am on my own. *You'll be fine,* the Navy promised. Yeah. *Fine* means 'not their problem.'

The bitter bile of guilt threatens to overwhelm me as I stand looking at the man in the mirror. I know his face well, although he is a stranger, a shadow of the man that once was. Trembling like a kicked dog, I lie down again to avoid the mirror.

I light a cigarette, thinking about Mina. I want to save her, give her a measure of peace. I want to show her that it's not too late, that she doesn't have to end up like me. All went better than I'd dared hope on our date. I never expected to be touched as deeply as Mina touched me. I won a measure of her trust, or maybe she feels the need to save me. It's too soon to see the rest of her face ... that will come with time. Time I may not have, if tonight is an indication of how fast I am falling apart.

I look at my hands, shaking uncontrollably. The shakes of a junkie gone too long.

I stub my half-smoked butt and roll out of bed. I have allowed myself to deteriorate not only mentally, but also physically. I pump out sit-ups, sets of thirty mixed in with sets of thirty push-ups. I make it through three cycles before I am whipped. It's a start. Healthy body leads to healthy mind. I break out laughing hysterically. *No more smokes, either.* I am laughing again. I am so beyond insane.

